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ABSTRACT

In order to achieve literacy, children must have mastered the decoding and encoding processes of the language of instruction. Usually this has been accomplished long before the child enters school. However, if the child's language is atypical for any reason, such as cultural or linguistic factors, then the acquisition of literacy requires a well-laid foundation which consists of a sympathetic and comfortable classroom environment and facility with the language of instruction. When this has been accomplished, the child is ready to learn to read, but should do so under conditions conducive to mastering reading skills. Through all this, it must be remembered that language variation can be used as an adjunct to learning to read rather than a hindrance. (JM)

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LANGUAGE VARIATION AND LITERACY

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The topic upon which I have been asked to speak today is Language Variation and Literacy. One could argue at great length about whether or not in a modern, technological society literacy is an essential characteristic for living. However, I am going to begin by assuming that literacy is an educational goal worth achieving. Simply defined literacy is the ability to read and write and in the context of this discussion, the literate child is the one who can, and in fact does, read and write.

It is generally accepted that in the educational setting there are four major facets of the language arts -- listening, speaking, reading and writing. Of these, speaking and listening are normally acquired before reading and writing. In fact, long before the child comes to school he has mastered the fundamentals of both encoding and decoding his language. That is, he can both speak (make himself understood) and listen (understand what is being said). The child learns to speak and to listen largely as a function of his participation in the language milieu in which he is immersed. In other words, Japanese children understand and speak Japanese, French children

CS002260

French -- providing of course that they live in France and are surrounded by French speaking people. Canadian children, at least Western Canadian children, for the most part learn to speak English simply because English is the most commonly spoken language in their homes, on their playgrounds and in their schools.

Undoubtedly it is unnecessary to point out that language learning is accomplished at a very early age, with amazing rapidity and skill and without formal teaching. When one considers the early age and lack of sophistication of the child, the feat, in many ways, might be classified as something of a miracle. As Smith (1971) points out, the child at the very early age of between one and two years has a fully functioning knowledge of the spoken aspects of his language. He has made assumptions about what are the relevant elements and relations of his language, he has been able to discern significant differences in the physical representation of speech, he has established his own grammatical and semantic categories and rules, he has tested his hypotheses on a trial-and-error basis learning through feedback whether a rule applies or not. In other words, in this relatively short period of time, the child has successfully solved the problem of decoding his language and furthermore he is successfully able to encode it.

Not too long ago, I had occasion to observe at close hand a girl of about 18 months for over an hour. I was sitting

in a dentist's reception room -- and this little pixie was busily going from one person to the next chattering away -- the intonation patterns beautifully mastered -- but meaningful sounds not yet fully understood. In other words, she could jabber away as though she were, in fact, communicating. She pointed at my purse, raised her eyebrows and looked at me. She did not have to say one thing. I knew what she wanted. I said "purse" and she repeated "pu." In return, I said "purse." Her next attempt was "pus." "Good for you" -- at which point she rushed across to her mother gurgling with laughter, pointing at my purse, saying "pus" "pus" -- an effort for which she received positive reinforcement from her mother. Neither of us, however, attempted to correct the inaccurate pronunciation except to provide a better model. Each time she said "pus" received encouragement and heard "purse."

It is probably safe to say that before a child comes to school, he has had considerable experience with all the cognitive skills involved in language learning. He knows how to ascertain significant differences in physical phenomena, to establish equivalencies, to make use of redundancy, to accumulate new information by testing hypotheses, and to try out possible rules for feedback purposes. In mastering both the decoding and encoding skills, in fact, the child has experienced success with precisely the skills he needs in order to learn to read and write.

Anne Forrester, a former graduate student of mine at the University of Victoria, has examined the conditions surrounding language learning. She notes the following points:

1. Language is learned by an infant without special instruction as to the rules which govern it. The child himself derives these rules intuitively and inductively. They are his own.
2. Language-learning is a process of differentiation, of recognizing how the totality of language can be divided into many component parts. (Note that the totality -- the total immersion comes first. The child does not learn to speak by learning discrete sounds and attempting to put them together like beads on a string.)
3. Language development, like motor development and cognitive development, proceeds from gross to fine. At first, the categories used by the child are global, including such diverse parts of language as adjectives, pronouns and nouns. In time, the child learns to differentiate numbers of categories and applies them in accordance with the rules of fully evolved adult grammars.
4. The child is a careful observer of language and bases his learning upon integrating spoken messages within the context or setting in which they occur. He is examining the connections between the language and its context. As with the little girl and the purse, the experience is real -- and object and its name.

5. Meaning is central to language development. The child may be playing with sounds as he is learning and imitating the language he hears around him. But the words he uses are verbal statements of his understanding of his environment. New words or syntactic structures are used by the child after he has learned their meanings and integrated them into his existing language structures.
6. The child himself selects the time he requires to advance to a new level of linguistic development. He can be said to draw up his own schedule of learning.
7. The learning environment in which the child acquires his mother tongue furnishes a vast amount of language input, presenting him with the totality of language in all its complexities and inconsistencies.
8. The parent, who in the case of language learning is the first teacher, models language and provides feedback to the child on his language. The feedback provided to the learner confirms that he has been heard and his meaning understood. The child's "daddy byebye," is likely to be countered by, "That's right, daddy has gone to work." There is no correction of the child's as yet ungrammatical or imprecise language. Content rather than form provides the focus.
9. The child himself is trusted to correct or improve his gross language production over a period of time on the basis of the language he hears around him. Language is treated as

a way of communicating meaning in many different ways. Accuracy of form or precision of expression are not seen as essential in the child's development toward fluency. He is trusted to learn and does so.

In essence, the conditions surrounding language learning are similar to those which should obtain in learning to read. Unfortunately, very often precisely the opposite occurs. Meaning is central to the process of learning to read just as it is in learning to speak. There is a mythology abroad that children whose language milieu is atypical are in some way disadvantaged in language skills when they come to school. This is simply not the case. The learning of any language requires precisely the same cognitive processes as does the learning of any other language. No language is inherently superior to another in the communication process. The difficulty, of course, is that for many children whose native language may not be English, the transmission of meanings has not yet been fully mastered for the child in the school setting where English is the language of instruction. I would suggest to you that until the child can abstract meaning from the infuse meaning into the language of instruction (that is, master both the decoding and the encoding processes) the achievement of literacy is extremely difficult if not impossible.

My own experience with language variation and literacy has been confined to my work with native Indian children. I would like to suggest that to assume that Indian

children are disadvantaged in language skills when they come to school, is the worst possible assumption that the teacher can make. As a matter of fact, my experience has been quite the reverse -- Indian children often have a rich language background on which a teacher can build. However, I think the point must be conceded that for many native Indian children, language may in fact, be locked in. The problem for the teacher is to get it out. I am not speaking idly here -- but rather on the basis of some experimental work I have done. In this connection, one summer, I worked on the Tsartlip Indian reservation with a group of children who had been characterized as "non-verbal" and who had experienced failure in learning to read in their first year of school. Using art as the medium of expression and starting where the children were -- not where I was or where I wanted them to be -- I had the children tell me about their paintings. Reinforcement in the form of a hug, a smile, or a verbal acknowledgement was liberally used. It should be acknowledged that it is extremely important that whatever else one does, one starts where the child is and reinforces him for his efforts at his own level of achievement. The following set of slides will document one child's progress over the six week period.

SLIDES 1 - 10

It must be very clear from these slides that the difficulty does not appear to be in the sophistication of the

child's language as a basis for beginning reading instruction. On the other hand, helping the child feel comfortable in the classroom setting may well pose serious difficulties. This involves the teacher in a whole host of basic but secondary activities -- knowing the child's background, appreciating and accepting cultural differences and wherever possible knowing the language background of the child. If this is not done, then teachers might well be misled in making assumptions about the linguistic competency of the child. All that one can emphasize here is that the more that is done in this regard, the better.

It seems to me that this cannot be too strongly stressed. Whether or not the language variation involves another language altogether or whether the variation occurs as a result of culturally different patterns, a different cognitive style or whatever, the child must be comfortable in and gain facility with the language of instruction and the cultural milieu in which he is expected to live and to learn. This is absolutely basic and should precede any attempts to help the child learn to read.

There are many ways in which to accomplish the task of getting the child to participate comfortably and actively in classroom activities. Several programmes, for example, have invited parents to act as aides in kindergarten and first grade.

In the Kindergarten Curriculum Guide for Indian Children published by the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs, are noted the following skills with which the children should feel comfortable.

1. Listening

   Many children raised in rural environments have learned to discriminate and interpret sounds of nature. This is the base from which to move to fine auditory discrimination in words. But this is also true, of course, for any child raised in the country.

2. Sound production

   The objective here is to develop an ease in initiating sounds. The use of instruments is one major avenue. Also, verbalizations accompany a familiar ritual, story or play may be used.

3. Fluency

   Specific activities for the development of fluency in the language of instruction include:

   (a) meal-talk and food preparation rituals
   (b) library and language corners where materials in the language of instruction are available.
   (c) also taped stories by community elders can be used for the shy, timid child.

   Teachers, incidentally, must understand non-verbal communication which plays a significant role in communication.

4. Semantic development

   Children learn to use language in problem-solving at an accelerated pace during the ages 4 - 7. Children who are exposed to conflicting language pressures have a particularly difficult time in developing the ability to generalize and discriminate.

5. Language power

   Developmental activities might include:
   - matching objects by sounds.
   - labelling objects.
   - pantomime guessing.
   - dramatic play.

Once the child is a fully functioning, communicating individual -- an equal member of the community of children in the classrcom -- then and only then can the teacher hope to facilitate his learning to read. A cursory look at the conditions often surrounding the teaching of reading and a comparison with the conditions of language learning previously discussed should suffice to help teachers avoid the pitfalls so often encountered. Often, in fact, the conditions surrounding reading and writing instruction are in direct contradiction to those surrounding the successful mastery of the skills required in learning to speak and understand the language.

Conditions surrounding reading instruction

1. Rules usually are provided by an adult instead of having the child evolve them inductively. Compare this with language learning, remembering that the infant learns language without special instruction as to the rules which govern it. It seems probable, in fact, that the child devises his own rules for reading and applies them to aid his reading. Two extremely important such rules are: to read, you look for meaning; to derive meaning, you use the structure of language to aid you. One could go on at great length about the contextual matrix of decoding. Suffice it to say that the good reader is able to sample the data (i.e. the written text) efficiently in his search for meaning.
2. Individual building blocks are provided in order to construct a whole, rather than presenting a complete picture to be

taken apart and reassembled by the learner. Again it is important to realize that this process which is characteristic of much instruction in reading is in direct contradiction to the learning strategies the child has already mastered -- namely that of differentiation and discrimination. In fact, it is probable that the child should be helped to see significant differences in visual patterns as they relate to meaning rather than attempting, as is so often the case, to build meaning out of a set of non-meaningful sounds. In fact, it is only when the child recognizes the totality of the sounds as they relate to meanings that he can decode the language. He may do this in spite of us, of course, rather than because of us.

3. Fine discrimination and accuracy too often are required and precise categories are established by the teacher, rather than by the child. The whole notion of discovery is lost.

4. The use of context to guide understanding is often minimized and the child has little opportunity to observe the interaction between written language and meaning. Unlike oral language, written language during the first few months of grade one seems quite separate from the life of the child. This is particularly true when the language of reading is foreign to the child's spoken language. Even for native speakers of English this is often the case. How much more complex the process is for children whose language varies in significant ways -- either linguistically or culturally -- from the norm.

5. Sounds rather than meaning are stressed during initial reading instruction. Yet to a child, sound often appears to be

secondary. He is focussing on meaning,concrete referents, or the underlying "deep structure" of words and sentences. In fact it can be argued that only when he knows meaning can he sound out anything. Certainly the sound-symbol correspondences must be meaningful for there to be any degree of success at all. Even then, if you catch what a child is doing, when he sounds out a word such as c a t he invariabily establishes the gestalt before he knows the meaning. That is, if he is successful he says "c a t" "cat."

6. The teacher prepares the timetable for learning and the sequence in which new information is to be assimilated. Some of this is probably inevitable. I have no illusions about a class of 25 children and how difficult it is to attend to each of their needs. My own particular style is to structure some of the work but to leave some of it to the child to structure. In this way, perhaps I have the best of both worlds.

7. The type and amount of learning material available to the child is in many cases carefully controlled and limited to the components of written language deemed appropriate for beginners by adults. This is perhaps one of the worst aspects of reading instruction. I have actually seen teachers cut off children's reading at the bottom of a page -- simply because the teacher has decided that "this is enough for today." I've actually heard teachers say, "Don't turn the page. We'll save it for tomorrow." I can think of nothing more calculated to destroy a child's interest in reading than this sort of thing. Somehow the objective of what we are doing has been totally lost or

forgotten. The purpose of reading is to read. The only justification for any instructional strategy is that it helps the child to read. There is nothing of inherent integrity in phonics instruction. All you are doing is giving a child a tool whereby he can unlock the code. And I would submit to you that if the child can take the "reader" home and read it entirely in an evening, then he probably does not need the long, and often tortuous, instruction that will follow. This is not to suggest that sharing cannot or should not occur. But the everlasting printing and answering of questions on every story is surely busy work at best if the child can easily read the material. I would submit to you that the amount of time given to an individual child is minimal at best. For every hour of "instruction" in the usual three group paradigm, each individual child is fortunate to get two minutes.

Transparency

I suspect that the model that we use in teaching children to play the piano is perhaps closer to the ideal. In other words, children should be encouraged to practice -- to explore the medium -- to learn through experience what the critical elements are. If a child is really reading for meaning he will know when he has made an error if it is an important error. And if it isn't, I would submit that it doesn't matter.

8. There is little modelling of fluent reading in the typical classroom. Children generally are exposed primarily to the

halting efforts of their peers. Instead of providing expanded feedback to the young reader indicating that he has correctly perceived the meaning of a written passage, the teacher is likely to correct the child reading mother as "mom" or little bird as "teeny bird," or to refer him to rules of phonics if he does not recognize a word in the text. Form rather than content are likely to be stressed. In language learning, you will remember that context rather than form was the key to success. I have conducted a career-long campaign to eliminate the abuses of "oral reading round the circle." All you are doing in this endeavour is to train children to read silently at an oral reading rate -- and this is the last thing you want to do. Modelling is one thing -- oral reading round the circle quite another.

9. The child is generally asked to correct imprecise reading. The written text is taken as a precise and unalterable representation of its underlying meaning. The need for accuracy is stressed and the child is not usually given the opportunity to formulate his own corrections. I suppose this is one of the saddest features of many classrooms -- the feeling the child has about mistakes. Errors should be formative in nature -- that is they should assist the child to discern his own problems and give him clues as to how to proceed in the future.

I have dwelt, perhaps overly long on the actual process of language learning and literacy acquisition emphasizing, I hope, that language variation can be used as an adjunct to

learning to read rather than a hindrance. Let me say, however, that the one thing I have mentioned only briefly may well be the most important element in the whole process -- that is, how the child feels about himself as an individual in the learning evironment. To me, it is absolutely fundamental that the child feel comfortable and worthwhile in the classroom. He must know that he is a person of worth and that whatever he has to say -- in whatever linguistic style -- will be accepted and is acceptable. I know of one classroom where several languages are spoken, and somehow, believe it or not, it doesn't really matter. The children know when there is concern and respect. They know when they are valued. You simply cannot fool them. When they are aware of this, when they feel it -- then they will begin to communicate verbally. They simply will. It's like a tender bud opening itself to the sun. After they have begun to communicate verbally -- then there is a basis for beginning the process of reading acquisition. Immerse the children in their language -- show them what it looks like written down and show them how it can be brought back from the written page to the person.

To help children achieve literacy is a privilege not to be taken lightly. The basic foundation is language both spoken and understood. If the language is atypical -- for whatever reason; cultural or linguistic -- then the acquisition of literacy requires a foundation well and truly laid.

References

Smith, F. Understanding Reading. Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1971.

A Kindergarten Curriculum Guide for Indian Children. Washington, D.C.: U. S. Bureau of Indian Affairs, 1974.

November, 1975

1. A pirate ship.

2. This is a house.

3. This is a clown.
He is juggling balls.

4. This is a pirate having war. One got killed.

5. These are snakes. They are rattlesnakes under water. There is a baby one.

6. This is a sailboat.
This is a sky.
This is a sun.
This is a man driving the sailboat.
This is water.
These are sails.
The sailboat is floating on the water.

7. This is a tugboat. This is the sun.
The tugboat is pulling another boat.
This is water.
This is the sky, and these are the clouds.

8. This is a moon and a rocket flying on it.
The spaceman is walking on the moon.
He sees a moon creature.

9. This is the moon and a rocket is flying on it.
This is Mars up here.
These are Mars men heading for earth.
That is their plan.

10. This is a moon. This is a rocket.
The rocket is flying on the moon.
There are moon creatures.
This is a spaceman floating on the air.
They went up there to look at the moon.
People are looking at the moon with a telescope at the observatory.

11. This is a sun.
The girl is afraid of the monster.
She is scared of the sun.
She is scared of the mountains.
She is scared of the snow too.
Nothing else.